

Protecting Journalists: Defending Democracy in Mexico

Friday, February 25 2022 PST (San Diego)

Panelists:

- Wendy Fry, The San Diego Union-Tribune
- Sergio Sarmiento, Reforma
- Siria Gastelum, Global Initiative
- Inés García, Punto Norte
- Sonia de Anda, Colectivo Yo Sí Soy Periodista

Moderators:

- Rafael Fernández de Castro, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies
- Jeff Light, The San Diego Union-Tribune

- Key Takeaways -

The assault on truth in both countries continues to grow

- President López-Obrador criticizes the press nearly every day. Many are questioning how his actions may be facilitating the killings of journalists. The general view was that they do not see a direct relationship between AMLO's statements and the killings, but condemn the irresponsibility of his actions.
- This problem exists in the U.S. with the way former President Trump speaks about journalists.
- There is a lack of confidence in Mexico that the proper people are actually being prosecuted.

Strengthening Mexican journalism is necessary to strengthen Mexican democracy, but the protection mechanisms continue to fail.

- Discussion -

What is new or different about the current situation in Tijuana?

- **Escalation of violence:** Many journalists did not think violence would continue to grow. Seeing two murders of journalists happen in the same week shows those on the ground the high level of vulnerability they face currently. There is a sense of loss of security and the killings force journalists to see the risks more clearly.
 - Between 2019 and 2020, 22% of assassinations of media workers worldwide happened in Mexico according to the Global Assassinations Monitor¹
 - A wave of indiscriminate killings is affecting Mexican society. There were over 33,000 murders in Mexico in 2021.²

¹ ["Murder of journalists in Mexico a threat to democracy." Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 18 Feb 2022.](#)

² ["Murders in Mexico fall 3.6% in 2021, but femicides rise." Reuters, 20 Jan 2022.](#)

- “Nowadays, killing comes cheap in Mexico. For 5000 pesos you can hire someone to kill anyone” - Sergio Sarmiento
- **Impunity and investigations:** There were recent arrests of suspects of Margarito’s murder. Even with arrests taking place, many are skeptical that the investigation is legitimate. In the past, non-guilty people were arrested following the murder of a journalist so the government could appear that they were prosecuting and following up with the investigation. The current movement for justice in reaction to the killings makes journalists feel more exposed. Many are afraid that those responsible could lash out to journalists in response to the attention.

Do you believe that there is a meaningful effort from the government in Baja California to protect journalists?

- The government wants to appear like they are doing something about the killings. There is a need to address the root causes of the violence: poverty and weapons exports and demand for drugs. The mechanism to protect journalists in Baja California has failed.
- Comments from AMLO demeaning the work of reporters undermines any action to protect journalists.
 - “When [President Lopez-Obrador] makes comments demeaning the work of reporters, the people threatening us—bloggers, influencers, Facebook [users]—are echoing those exact phrases to us...people feel like they have some kind of license to mistreat reporters on the ground” - Wendy Fry

What could happen in Tijuana to make you feel safer doing your job?

- The government says that there are fewer homicides, but impunity is still a huge issue. There is a lack of sentencing and convictions of those committing the murders. There were 250+ homicides in Tijuana in the first weeks of this year.
 - “If justice is not served and cases are not being investigated in-depth, there will not be safe conditions for journalists to keep doing their job” - Ines García
- People in Mexico react to these murders by pointing out that not just journalists are being killed. For journalists to do their jobs and for everyone to feel safe, the narrative needs to be changed. Many people see the press as the enemy, especially after the power shift to Morena with AMLO’s election in Mexico. There is a belief that journalists work for PRI or PAN, and therefore will be against anything AMLO does.

In TJ among establishment class, the coping mechanism is to look past the violence. People are concerned about the image of the city and do not want to center criminality. Is it responsible to look past these murders? What is the journalistic role to address these central problems in Mexico?

- When you live in an environment of violence, you continue your best to try to live your life. You see the murders, but want to live your life. Journalists must keep reminding people of the problem while understanding that the middle class is going to look past it to continue living their lives. We have to be perfectly clear about the reasons for the violence. It’s not just weapons, but other factors that cause the violence.
 - 94% of murders never lead to conviction
 - “Impunity is the real issue” – Sergio Sarmiento

What is happening in Sinaloa? Are there lessons from the region for us to learn from?

- The problem is that the violence has now reached the middle class. Nobody is safe anymore.
- Like Tijuana, many worry about the image of these beautiful places that are wracked with violence.
- Global Initiative has worked on finding the narrative together in the community through gatherings of journalists, mothers of disappeared people, and other community members.

How can we improve the situation? What is the SD Union-Tribune doing and how can USMEX help?

- Media workers are making efforts to stay connected with one another to try to stay safe. When AMLO visited TJ, they wrote a letter to express how they have been feeling about the situation.
- The role of institutions like USMEX and the SD Union-Tribune is very important. They should keep pressure on the government to do their main job of protecting citizens. AMLO should not attack journalists just because he does not like what they are saying. They are fighting violence on one side and fighting the president who has been an inciter on the other side.
- Much of the aggression towards journalists is from authority. We need to work together with journalists and to protect them.
 - “[journalists] are the ones who help us keep authorities accountable and help us understand how organized crime is infiltrating our government so we need them if we want to solve this enormous challenge together.” - Siria Gastelum
- Proper journalism for the moment: an integrated conversation that accounts for the violence and the rest of society together should be further explored.